

INTERVIEW WITH JULIE I. MAY

Entrevista com Julie I. May

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<https://doi.org/10.1590/S2178-149420210310>

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Interview granted on February 13, 2019, in Brooklyn in New York. Article received on June 16th, 2021 and approved for publication on June 21th, 2021.

JULIE MAY AND THE BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION (CENTER FOR BROOKLYN HISTORY)

Located at the landmark area of Brooklyn, which is one of the most well-known neighborhoods of New York City, the Center for Brooklyn History (CBH)¹ (housed in the interior of a building dating back to the end of the 20th century) shares its space with a museum and an important archive and object collection that documents the 400 years of Brooklyn's past.

Its oral history project was created in 1973. Today, it embraces a collection of approximately 1,200 interviews, part of which is dedicated to immigrants². The collection is hosted in a digital portal that allows direct access to audio recordings and related items. The CBH is, thus, a technical and technological reference in terms of constituting and preserving oral history archives.

Formerly known as Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS), the new CBH is a collaborative project between BHS and the Brooklyn Public Library, which aims at the expansion and the digital democratization of its historical collection of 157 years. Among other documents, CBH's archives embraces an extensive oral history collection.

In 2019, Julie May was the archival director of the oral history collection and the co-director of the Society. This interview was conducted during my research time at the Center for Latin American Studies from Columbia University³, as a part of the activities of the *Migrations from the Northeast to the Southeast: a historical-critical analysis* project, funded by the Governamental Foundation for Financial Support to Academic Research of São Paulo (*Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo — FAPESP*), which was coordinated by me. The purpose of the visit was to learn about oral history initiatives related to migrations in the New York area.

The CBH's experience with collections of immigrant narratives is inspiring and can enlighten oral historians. Useful suggestions to set up similar projects can stem from it. The oral history collection presented at the portal offers sound recordings as the key document, even though there are also several transcribed interviews. In terms of ethical procedures for the use of interviews, the institutional policy follows the *Principles for Oral History and Best Practices for Oral History* of the American Oral History Association⁴. They were created in 2009 in order to provide guidelines to replace common procedures of the Institutional Review Boards on Human Research (IRBs)/Research Ethics Committees (IRCs)⁵, primarily directed to

health research. These *Principles* clarify the differences between oral history and other types of research involving oral information provided by human participants: oral history interviews are in depth and focus on the interviewees' personal and subjective trajectories. The document also indicates how an oral historian should proceed in the different stages of the interview, being respectful with the interviewees and adopting best practices.

In this interview, Julie May has presented a generous description of the immigrant's oral history collections. She also discusses managerial and technical aspects of the creation and maintenance of the collection, highlighting the significance of the constant interaction between memory institutions, surrounding communities, and researchers involved with oral and public history projects⁶.

A few interesting topics in this interview are:

- the importance of the relationship between oral history collections and the community;
- the adherence to technical guidelines in the creation and management of oral history collections;
- the understanding that oral history public collections are headed to all audiences, ranging from the academic researcher to the general public;
- the understanding of the oral history collection's role in fulfilling memory and history archives when communities are not in possession of other forms of registering their memories.

Reading this interview and approaching the Center for Brooklyn History Oral History Portal is highly recommended to anyone who works with oral history or who intends to build their own oral history collection. More than an agglomerate of sources, this is a successful and exciting model of public oral history project that combines both serious documentation and a true appreciation of community engagement⁷.

INTERVIEW WITH JULIE I. MAY

Interviewee: Julie I. May

Interviewer: Valéria Barbosa de Magalhães

Interviewer: Julie, thank you for receiving me here. I would like you to tell me about the immigrant oral history projects that you have here, if they were a demand from the immigrant communities or the universities, or if the idea came from the Brooklyn Historical Society itself.

Julie: We acquired the collection in a variety of ways, most recently when we launched this Oral History Portal⁸. It was also a federally funded project and it was focused on what we call “legacy collections”. Those were created prior to our time here (my time and the oral historian Zaheer Ali) and they were recorded on cassette tape. They were up in our cold storage and some had transcripts, some did not. They were kind of relatively unknown to us. From our understanding from the notes that we have and the reports that we have within those collections, they are all kind of different.

Some of them were transcribed and some of them not. It just kind of depended on the project. Each one was its own independent considerable project. The catalyst for that project could have been from Brooklyn Historical Society or from the community or it could have been a collaboration, but from our understanding most of them did come from an idea and a concept out of Brooklyn Historical Society’s of that particular time’s content agenda.

We worked with public historians, historians and oral historians to identify people in the community to interview. I think that is generally how they occurred and that is how we pursue oral history collections today. There are exceptions, like the collection *Filipino American Oral Histories of Johnson Street*⁹. That was donated to us. The woman who created those oral histories is herself an oral historian and she is a Filipino-American. Her father was Filipino and her mother was American, if I remember correctly. I think that is pretty much how it is, because of the immigration policy at the time. She grew up in the Johnson Street area, which is no longer like before, it’s been taken over by a sort of corporate complex called Metro Tech¹⁰, but she reached out to people in the community that she knew personally, or her parents knew, and interviewed them. So that collection came to us through a donation like any other collection of archival material.

There was another one like that, the *Sarita Daftary-Steel East New York Oral History*¹¹. She was trained as an oral historian by one of Brooklyn Historical Society’s oral historians, Sady Sullivan¹². She did a training program that Sady used to lead, and she then went into a community where she was working at a type of community center there, and she launched her own oral history project.

There you have kind of a combination of things, but you can call them “community-driven” or “community participating in the community”. What we find is that, again, depending on the collection of oral histories, it really makes for a more successful project when the oral historians either have a connection to the community or really work to develop a relationship with the community stakeholders.

Interviewer: Do you have rules for receiving these donations? Because anyone could come here and say: “I’m gonna give you all these records...”.

Julie: That is very true! And, as I am sure you are aware that maintaining and preserving and describing oral history... It is not a burden, but it is certainly a considerable effort. First of all, we have a collection committee in which I am a kind of head of that committee and it is chaired by a member of our board of trustees. It is made up of other trustees as well as collection staff and the president of the Brooklyn Historical Society. Every collection that we access into the BHS archives goes through the collection committee and I have a kind of very methodical way of presenting those collections to the committee. In fact, it almost creates a sort of skeletal finding aid just presenting it to the committee for review and approval.

With oral histories there are additional elements there, which is about the quality of the recording. We have certain technical specifications that we would like to get and that has to do with the quality of the audio; we can only do so much with the audio in order for it to be adequately heard by a researcher. And then the other requirements that we have for oral histories are that they come with a set of metadata, which is a descriptive enough term that says: "This is the narrator" and "this is the oral historian" and "this is when the recording took place" and "this is when it took place"; "these are the kind of things that we talked about in this oral history interview" and "these are the subjects that were covered". And that turns into an item level description of that interview, taken directly from the oral historian who had the direct relationship with the narrator. Then, of course, we would love to have a transcript.

I think in terms of sort of degrees of importance: the quality of the recording; the information that comes with it. Actually, what I forgot to mention is that we require a release from the narrator for every interview that we take in that indicates how that interview is allowed to be used or broadcasted in addition, finally, to the transcript. The transcript we are thrilled to get and we also understand if we don't, because that is something that oral historians and certainly the individuals who are pursuing these documentary projects are not always able to finance themselves.

Interviewer: Do you produce some of your own oral histories? I saw this *Muslims* one, which seems to be brand new...

Julie: The *Muslims in Brooklyn Oral History Collection*¹³. On December 6th 2019 it was officially launched; however, there is still a kind of trickling into the portal. We expect to have 56 interviews, total, and I think we are in the forties, so it's very new. That is a project spearheaded by Zaheer Ali¹⁴, our oral historian, and Liz Strong¹⁵, who is the project coordinator. They are the two primary interviewers of all of those narrators. It is part of a larger project that includes programming, an exhibition, and educational curriculum. So, as part of those other projects, where the oral histories will be incorporated in some way or another, Zaheer

and Liz are creating clips that are curated. They are taking slices of a very particular contextual element in one of those three other productions. Generally, in terms of technical production we don't do a lot of enhancement to the oral history.

Interviewer: That would be my second question: do you have technical guidelines that you follow to produce oral history? I mean, do you follow some other institute guidelines, like some university center, or do you have your own people out of the Brooklyn Historical Society that do that for you?

Julie: If I understand your question, yes. To be honest, Zaheer handles most of that. There is a very particular moment when the interviews transfer from the oral historian to the archives, so a lot of the kind of post-production occurs by the oral historian. Whether that is Zaheer or Liz or someone who that is donating to us, because I am a kind of this archivist: I want the package, I want the WAV file, I want the MP3 file, I want them named certain way, and I want the transcripts, and I want the metadata sheet, and I want the release. And that means I can take that package and I can process it or I can have an archivist to process it. So, we do some things, however.

If the media is too big, if it is a particularly long interview (and some of those *Muslims in Brooklyn* oral histories are particularly long), they come in two or three files. So, one of the sort of production policies we have is to create a single file, because I am trying to preserve the integrity of the interview between the oral historian and the narrator. We want to make sure that the file and the interview are combined into one. We don't want it to get separated and then we are kind of creating another master archival WAV file of the interview and, from that, we make our derivative MP3 and then there are some enhancements... I don't want to call them enhancements. We definitely say the oral historian will coordinate with the narrator to have any reductions: somebody had a cold, so maybe we take out some particularly nasty coughs or something like that and this is as per the narrator. We find it perfectly acceptable to leave those sorts of nuances in the interview. But some narrators will want it removed for whatever reason: somebody blows their nose or something, whatever, so we might take that sort of thing out, we also take out birth dates for security and privacy concerns, so that is removed.

Interviewer: Do you cut that part even in the audio?

Julie: Yes. Because we don't want someone to be able to locate a person. This doesn't seem to be a consistent practice about this or a best practice about this: that is an institutional decision on our part. If someone mentions their birthday — "I was born on Christmas Day" — we are certainly not talking about the person's year they are born,

because of course you are placing a person's history within the context of the larger History, that can be figured out —, generally we do make that removal. If there is something that happens with the audio — maybe something with the mic was off — we might raise the levels, we might do some of that, all for the purpose of making sure that that audio is accessible to the researcher. But we are not adding music in there, we are not adding anything to sort of overly produce.

Interviewer: Do you keep the names of the interviewees?

Julie: The interviewees? Yes, it is definitely part of the record and it is included in... So, we have a format we follow for the transcript which, you know, I'm trying to remember... The very top of the transcript will say: "Interview of Julie May by Zaheer Ali, on February 13th, 2019".

Interviewer: But do you keep the name of the interviewee?

Julie: Interviewee? Yes, yes.

Interviewer: But you can find the person if you take out the birthday and you keep the name of the person...

Julie: Yes, we do.

Interviewer: How do you analyze the importance of your immigration oral history collection for academic researchers? Do you have people from universities coming here to use the archives and to analyze the interviews? Is it important to have these archives for academic purposes?

Julie: It is definitely important to have them here for the academic researchers. This repository is open to all researchers of all types, so we not only cater to scholarly researchers, but to people in the neighborhood, people doing genealogical research. People can come in here much like they might to a public library and access our archives just by requesting them from the librarian.

In terms of the oral histories, we certainly have our fair share of academics requesting the use of the collections and interacting with. Usually the oral historian or the public historian. But because they are online, you look at the portal and it is so easy to discover the interviews that are relevant to the research and to search within the interview for the very relevant part of the interview that they don't need to come here, they have it! They have the audio, they have the transcripts.

So, what we are doing is certainly looking at our Google Analytics to see what kind of visitorship we have to the portal. We are not necessarily able to see the characteristics of everyone who visits the portal, we can make some guesses, if they come from .edu, we know they are coming from academics, either if they are students or professors. But those analytics only tell us that much. We have not necessarily done a direct survey. A lot of our feedback is anecdotal. At the December 6th 2019 opening of the *Muslims in Brooklyn Projects* I certainly spoke to a few professors who said: "We have been using your portal...". Because it has been about two years now that it has been online... So, we have gotten really positive feedback, we received an award for it, we are going for some additional grants to sort of expand it, so that others could adopt the same methodology for their oral histories. We have really positive feedback about it. So, we think people are using it!

Interviewer: Would you say that your main public is the community?

Julie: I couldn't really say that our main focus is any of those things. I feel like we serve them all and we serve them all equally. I mean, they have different demands or requests of us, but we try to serve them all equally.

Interviewer: Do you have some documentation that the interviewee has to sign when you receive the interviews?

Julie: We have what is called *Rights of Reproduction Form*. What is on that is: your name, your contact info and it has the *Title 17 of the US Copyright Law*, which is about using archival resources for scholarly purposes and research. We ask people to tell us about what they are using, whatever they are: photographs, archival materials, oral histories. Then, they have to sign and date. Of course, when people are quoting oral histories from the online portal we do not necessarily know, but we do include the pop up that is exactly that same statement that talks about the nature of oral histories and how you should quote them. We include the proper citation in every interview, so yes, we do have some things in place.

Interviewer: So, everything is anonymous because the interviewees ask it to be anonymous?

Julie: Yes, that is correct. We don't have a lot of restricted oral histories either, it's not very common and those would definitely be from the *Legacy Oral History Collections*. I am trying to think of an example... Zaheer or Liz, I think, interviewed someone who kind of waffled back and forth: "Should I, shouldn't I", "I think this public...". At that point, we go with the wishes of the narrator, however one of the processes that the Oral History Department follows in interviews is to do a pre-interview. So, once Zaheer has reached out to a potential narrator interviewee, he will have

a conversation with that person, so there are no surprises, so that person has some time to figure out: are they in or are they out? Because, as you know, it takes a lot of time: scheduling the appointment, getting to the person or having the person coming to you, doing the actual interview, going back to the narrator for the approval, so it is a big time investment and we do not want to go down that road. And then, as also part of the interview, it is not “all or nothing”. In the pre-interview the person can say: “I don’t want to talk about that” so, you don’t talk about that, you talk about other things. That reduces the amount of redactions you need to make, as well as the potential for that person to withdraw the interview from the archival collection and from public access.

Interviewer: How do you evaluate the importance of oral history for understanding the immigration process as a whole, especially for public history?

Julie: That might be a question that Zaheer could offer some more insight to. I can certainly speak to how we evaluate all our collections. One of the focuses within our *Collection Development Policy*¹⁶ is to represent under-documented communities within our collections. You can find genealogies and records of the wealthy European immigrants throughout our archives and the undocumented immigrants, they are immigrants! Whether they are speaking English or something else. Maybe they record and maintain their own kind of archival collections and records, maybe they don’t. There are chances that they are not going to end up here, unless we pursue them. So, we kind of have to sometimes educate or convince these community members of the importance of their voices and why they need to have a physical place within our archives. Sometimes that is really easy and they think: “Of course” and sometimes it is more convincing to them: “Don’t you understand how important your history is to the United States and to Brooklyn and to New York City?” It is a little bit of a learning curve.

We have this focus on the undocumented immigrants and their stories in the US. I can’t say to a Filipino-American laborer working in Johnson Street: “You know that book you published? We would like to have it!”, because they are not publishing books. Or: “You know that mark you made, some project you worked on, we’ve recorded it?” Well, it is not under the radar. So, oral histories are very useful and productive and successful at documenting those communities. It is almost like an easy thing to do, just to have a conversation with somebody and yet when you listen to these oral histories and you hear what these folks have to say, it is more than illuminating, it is incredible how much they have to share.

Interviewer: Do you have records in other languages or are all of them in English?

Julie: Yes, remember that *Sunset Park Collection*¹⁷? There are some interviews in Mandarin and Cantonese. This is part of the projects that we launched on the Oral History Portal

and the portal made a connection with the Museum of Chinese in America¹⁸, which is located in Chinatown. They have a group of interns and they trained the interns to do the synchronization for us. So, we were able to include those in Mandarin and Cantonese.

Interviewer: Are they already translated on the website?

Julie: I don't think they are translated. I think they are just in Mandarin and Cantonese. Most of the interviews already have transcriptions and therefore they are synchronized, but the ones that are in other languages are indexed. So, these interns would listen to the interviews and they would create this kind of... You know, I don't wanna say "series level", but sort of: "This chunk of the interview was about this" and they would write a line or two about what it contained.

Interviewer: Thank you so much for this interview, Julie!

Conflicts of interest: nothing to declare.

Funding: The São Paulo Research Foundation.

NOTES

1 Available at: <<https://www.bklynlibrary.org/locations/center=-for-brooklyn-history#:~:text=The%20Center%20for%20Brooklyn%20History,it%2C%20for%20nearly%20140%20years>>. Access in: July 20, 2021.

2 See: *Muslims in Brooklyn Oral Histories; New neighbours: Sunset Park's Chinese Community Records; Puerto Rican Oral History Project Records; Patricia Carino Pasick Collection of Johnson Street Filipino-American Oral Histories; West Indian Carnival Documentation Project Records; Hispanic Communities Documentation Project Records.*

3 Available at: <<https://www.ccohr.incite.columbia.edu/>>. Access in: July 20, 2021.

4 Available at: <<https://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices-revised-2009/>>. Access in: July 20, 2021.

5 For more information, please check: World Health Organization (WHO). *Research ethics committees: basic concepts for capacity-building. Institutional Review Board by US FDA regulations.* New Hampshire: 2006. Available at: <<https://www.fda.gov/about-fda/center-drug-evaluation-and-research-cder/institutional-review-boards-irbs-and-protection-human-subjects-clinical-trials>>. Access in: July 20, 2021.

- 6** For more information on public history, please check the website of the National Council on Public History, available at, <https://ncph.org/program-guide/#0>
- 7** Special thanks to Ricardo Santhiago for his valuable contribution, suggestions and help with the English version.
- 8** Available at: <https://oralhistory.brooklynhistory.org/using-this-portal/>. Access in: July 20, 2021.
- 9** Available at: <https://oralhistory.brooklynhistory.org/collections/patricia-carino-pasick-collection-of-johnson-street-filipino-american-oral-histories/>. Access in: July 20, 2021.
- 10** Located in Downtown Brooklyn.
- 11** Available at: <https://oralhistory.brooklynhistory.org/collections/sarita-daftary-steel-collection-of-east-new-york-oral-histories/>. Access in: July 20, 2021.
- 12** Sady Sullivan: oral historian and curator for the Columbia Center for Oral History Archives at Columbia University and former Director of Oral History at Brooklyn Historical Society. For more information: <https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/programming/participants/sady-sullivan>. Access in: July 20, 2021.
- 13** Available at: <https://oralhistory.brooklynhistory.org/collections/muslims-in-brooklyn-oral-histories/>. Access in: July 20, 2021.
- 14** Zaheer Ali: *Brooklyn Historical Society* Oral Historian & Project Co-Director.
- 15** Liz Strong: Brooklyn-based freelance oral historian.
- 16** Available at: https://www.brooklynhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/BHS_CollectionDevPolicy2015.pdf. Access in: July 20, 2021.
- 17** Available at: <https://www.brooklynhistory.org/blog/tag/sunset-park/>. Access in: July 20, 2021.
- 18** Available at: <https://www.mocanyc.org/>. Access in: July 20, 2021.

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